

The New York Times is right.

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina – the worst natural disaster in American history – a generous Congress didn't appropriate money specifically for one project, such as rebuilding Mississippi's largest port, a vital economic engine. In fact, Congress didn't give my state more than \$5 billion in Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funding to specifically rebuild schools, harbors, water systems, or housing, either.

Congress approved the money for all those things. As the legislation appropriating the money says, it may be used for "necessary expenses related to disaster relief, long-term recovery, and restoration of infrastructure."

After seeing our state's post-Katrina recovery plan, which was presented to Congress in November 2005, Congress knew Mississippi would be rebuilding communities, some literally from the ground up, as the August 29, 2005 hurricane wiped the slate clean with winds and a storm surge that reached an incredible 38 feet deep.

Ironically, when contemplating the Katrina recovery package, Congress took its template from New York City's recovery following the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Congress had already enabled New York to use CDBG funds for a variety of needed restoration projects, including things like piers and storefront improvements in lower Manhattan.

In 2005 Congress was searching for a timely vehicle by which federal dollars could be disbursed as quickly as possible to help states impacted by Hurricane Katrina. As it did following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Congress chose the CDBG program, administered by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). As the fastest, most flexible federal vehicle to dispense federal money for local needs, CDBG was the appropriate choice, especially in times of disaster.

And, as in the 9/11 aftermath, Congress also realized that the Katrina CDBG package was, and continues to be, a disaster recovery package, set apart from the usual non-disaster CDBG requirements, which normally mandate that 70 percent of expenditures be for projects impacting low and moderate income communities.

That's why Congress granted my state waivers to the normal CDBG rules, much like it gave New York. Instead of 70 percent, Congress and HUD provided that only 51 percent of total program expenditures must be used to impact low and moderate income residents. After all,

Congress wasn't about to require that New York's Ground Zero be rebuilt with only low and moderate income housing.

According to the latest New York disaster recovery CDBG expenditures report, filed in March, just one percent of the \$2 billion Lower Manhattan Redevelopment Project has been spent to benefit low and moderate income residents. That's out of 11 percent budgeted for low/mod impact, far below Mississippi's 51 percent low/mod expenditures. The numbers rightly reflect reality. Just as in the 9/11 recovery, Hurricane Katrina presented a disaster whose recovery needs were different from the norm, so the program had to be structured around individual community recovery needs, not prepackaged requirements.

Now, to be sure, housing recovery, and particularly low and moderate income housing availability, is a key part of Mississippi's recovery. In fact about 70 percent of total CDBG package is dedicated to housing recovery.

Our housing recovery plan has helped Mississippi come down from a high of more than 48,000 FEMA trailers after the storm, to just around 200 remaining in the Coastal counties. So, far, we've disbursed about \$2 billion in direct grants to some 28,000 homeowners in Mississippi's three Coastal counties. More than 40 percent of that was exclusively to low and moderate income homeowners. Additionally, we're now in the process of building almost \$1 billion in low and moderate income rental units along our Coast.

So roughly \$3 billion of Mississippi's \$5 billion package is for restoring housing stock, most of this impacting low and moderate income households.

We've seen this \$3 billion CDBG housing investment help bring our housing stock back from a low of 65 percent of the pre-Katrina capacity, to more than 90 percent today. And, nationally renowned housing studies say our housing package will exceed 100 percent of pre-Katrina levels by 2011. In fact, we already have more public housing available in our three Coastal counties than prior to the storm, and we're building another 1,000 units on top of that.

The rest of our CDBG-funded Katrina package is for rebuilding our devastated infrastructure, replacing schools and public buildings such as police and fire stations and emergency operations centers, and rebuilding and improving water and wastewater systems.

All of these projects promote job retention and economic growth, like the restoration project at the State Port at Gulfport, where hundreds of union jobs – many held by minorities – are at stake. The port was heavily damaged by the storm, and the plan is to raise it to protect it and enhance public safety so the surrounding community won't suffer again from surge-driven shipping containers.

Mississippians do all this because Congress, HUD, two Presidential administrations and our state's citizens recognize this is a comprehensive disaster recovery package, far broader than just one particular need. Would the New York Times have insisted Lower Manhattan's recovery be governed by a pre-911 federal handbook? Would the paper implore that Ground Zero and its surroundings not be improved and better protected in the future? Of course not. Yet, the distant newspaper now argues Mississippi has failed because our recovery package isn't one dimensional, subject to pre-Katrina regulations that have nothing to do with the urgency of disaster recovery.

That's where the New York Times is wrong.

Many New Yorkers, some of them probably even read the Times, came to Mississippi's aid in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, and we are grateful for each one of them, as their assistance was invaluable. When people are hurting, or have lost every possession, when their jobs are washed away, when they have no school or home, much less running water or electricity – that's when it's time to act, and Mississippi did, just as New York did after 9/11.

We will continue rebuilding bigger and better, despite the insensitive and inaccurate pontifications of the New York Times.